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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001768

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: In positive human rights gesture, Tamil Tigers release large number of child recruits

Ref: FBIS Reston Va DTG 120241Z Sep 02

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Charge d'Affaires.  
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: UNICEF has confirmed that the Tamil Tigers have recently released up to 85 child recruits. The Tigers apparently took this step, unprecedented in its size, in reaction to the pressure it has received on this issue from domestic and international sources. The move may indicate a newfound receptivity by the Tigers to the notion of improving their abysmal human rights record. End Summary.

2. (U) UNICEF has confirmed that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have recently released up to 85 child recruits. According to UNICEF officials (see Ref), the LTTE apparently released the children gradually, over the course of several weeks in the late August through early September timeframe. After receipt of a list of the childrens' names from the LTTE, UNICEF has interviewed more than 20 of them, confirming that they had indeed been forcibly recruited into the LTTE's military structure and then returned to their families of late. UNICEF is confident that the rest of the names on the LTTE's list are also legitimate former child recruits. UNICEF is working with the families on programs focused on reintegrating the children back into society.

3. (SBU) UNICEF has monitored the LTTE's release of smaller numbers of child recruits in past years, but the apparent release of the 85 is unprecedented in its size. UNICEF contacts tell us that they continue to closely work with the LTTE to ensure the release of other child recruits. While UNICEF does not have an approximate figure, other contacts estimate that the LTTE may have well over 100 child soldiers still in its ranks, although the precise figure is not clear. (Note: There are occasional reports that the LTTE continues to recruit children forcibly, particularly in the eastern region.)

4. (C) The Tigers apparently took the step of releasing the child recruits in reaction to the pressure it has received on this issue from domestic and international sources. In a meeting with polchief, Harim Peiris, a spokesman for President Kumaratunga, noted that the President has been publicly pushing for the LTTE to improve its dire record in this area for years. Earlier this year, a visiting high-level Amnesty International team also urged the Tigers to take immediate steps on the issue in meetings with the group in the LTTE-controlled Wanni region of northern Sri Lanka. M. Nizar, an analyst at UNICEF, noted to us that it was clear that the LTTE was taking the child soldier issue very seriously based on the fact that LTTE Political Chief Thamilchelvan began to take a personal interest in the issue over the summer. Thamilchelvan, in fact, had noted to UNICEF representatives that the LTTE aimed to abide by the provisions of the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

5. (C) Comment: The move re the child recruits may indicate a newfound receptivity by the Tigers to the notion of improving their abysmal human rights record. In the past, the group basically ignored the substantial criticism it received on human rights issues. Perhaps with the peace process in full swing, the LTTE wants to clean up its act in order to look more respectable. End Comment.

6. (U) Minimize considered.

AMSELEM